

A work in progress:

Profession, Teacher



A Work in Progress: Educational Autobiography of Wendy Suarez University of South Florida “ The true joy of life is being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one instead of being a selfish little clot of ailments and grievances. ” —G. B. Shaw. “ For the scholar-practitioner, his or her being and becoming are socially constructed through practice. Therefore, the leader’s ethical self understandings are not gained through observing facts, but in his or her value-laden narrative renderings of those facts. ” -J. Lum Social Foundations I was always an inquisitive child. I remember a strong connection with my father in my earliest years, cloudy snapshots of a time when I was still an only child, the light of his life, and his buddy. I felt a sense of pride every time we tried new foods together or we sat outside and talked about the stars and the universe beyond while he grilled our dinner. Dad had attempted to earn a college degree, but could not complete his freshman year because of his parents’ finances. He entered the military in 1971, a few months before I was born, and excelled in his career as a sailor. He is a quiet and humble man, one of strong moral backbone and extremely high expectations for his children- especially me. My need for approval and the hunger for seeing and doing new things were set before I turned five. When my sister and brother came along, things changed. Hallmark memories are painful, uncomfortable. When I decided to give softball a try at age twelve, dad jumped in as umpire. If I wasn’t nervous enough walking up to the plate during my first (and only) season, hearing his voice thunder, “ STRIKE”, “ STRIKE”, “ OUT” totally broke down my self-confidence. Later, in high school, I remember coming home one day with glee because I had earned a “ 99%” on a challenging assignment. His response was, “ Why not a

hundred? " I've forgiven my father in recent years, understanding as an adult that he meant well, he just expressed his faith in me poorly. I don't remember ever feeling close to my mother, nor did I want to be like her. Never considering college, she was a stay at home mom and always talked down about herself as I was growing up. I suppose this is due to the dysfunctions in her nuclear family- issues I've caught wind of now and then in brief slips of tongue. The fact that my father nit-picks my mother's every movement doesn't help- but she takes it. Sometimes I think that there's more to my mother deep down that I've never gotten to see. Maybe she never really met that person, either. Stories of her excellence on the high school basketball team or outlandish social life as a teen shock me. I can't imagine her that way and I wonder if her life would have turned out different if one or two variables had been altered. When I was six years old my sister was born. Life went from that of a frolic-y, carefree child to that of the little mother. My brother was born twenty-one months later and I helped with feeding, diapering, bathing, etc. as well as the laundry, dishes, vacuuming and mowing the lawn. I withdrew into a state of depression and lack of self-worth. I was miserable for many years. Still, schoolwork came easy to me and I took pride in being the good student, the teacher's pet and the smart one in class. School was a place where I could be successful and appreciated. At the age of seventeen, I began searching for colleges. I paid the application fees with money I earned from my part-time job. I arranged trips with friends' parents to visit campuses, and made sure all my transcripts and test scores were in. My parents' final sting came when they asked, " Why do you think you're going to college? You won't finish

anyway..." (no one in my extended family on either side had ever earned a bachelors degree at that time). I replied, " Yes I will, and I'll get a Masters degree, too! " A few weeks later, I got a letter from Winthrop University offering a full academic scholarship and I was off to college a few months later with pure excitement about my new home. My parent's working class upbringing may have limited their choices in life, but I did not let it limit mine. Despite growing up in an unhappy household, what an amazing opportunity I had in traveling all over the country and its territories! I've been coastal and landlocked, in tropical zones and in ice storms, driven across the Grand Canyon and gazed upon the Hollywood sign perched on its hillside. My parents grew up in rural South Carolina, where I sat on my great-grandmother's porch shelling peas and watching her sweep with a homemade broom made of straw. I've been fascinated by the glory of New York City. I've lived in cities where everyone was " old" and where everyone was " twentysomething". As a result, I've never been able to understand or tolerate racism and homophobia- I've had too many friends of various race, nationality, religion and sexual orientation to be uncomfortable with people different from me. I've been the only straight person in a gay bar and the only white person in a black church. I find diversity and variety in lifestyles intriguing. Unfortunately, too much of anything can turn bad. My self-perceived ' strength', being blind to skin color, has worked against me at times. Growing up with very racist parents, I had to defend several friendships at an early age. I became obstinate. I placed such pride and value in my diverse affiliations that I failed, at times, to see people for who they really were. In defense of plurality, I placed trust, love and care in

several minorities who mistreated me and were not living a moral life, themselves. I've learned not to take people at face value, literally and figuratively! Just like the white man who seems to be a grump but really is just going through a tough time, the black lady who seems charming may be dubious and self-seeking. It's very challenging to live as one who postpones immediate judgment, looks for a form of honor in everyone, but does not take "bologna" when it's handed over on a platter. Input and Output From Kindergarten to sixth grade, I was enrolled in 12 different classrooms, and by the time I finished secondary school, I had more than sixty teachers over a course of thirteen years! Most of them were decent enough, although the majority seemed to work from a positivistic approach (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). Curriculum tended to be based on practice drills and tests. I often got bored, so much so that in Trigonometry I sat in the front row every day, looked at the homework assignment on the board, did the problems, put my head down and went to sleep. My teacher and I basically ignored each other. Having nearly perfect grades, I don't think she knew any other way to confront the situation! Moving from school to school, I also remember having to repeat material on a regular basis, such as when I joined a fifth grade class that was, much to my chagrin, some five or six lessons behind on the mundane weekly spelling lists that I found dull the first time around. The one experience that I loved more than any other was a mixed-grade unit in San Diego. Four homerooms of third, fourth and fifth graders were combined. We went about our day by rotating through core subjects based on ability levels. For once in my life, school was fun! The teachers made lessons interesting and if we finished early, there was always a challenge project waiting. I

never got bored waiting for classmates to “ figure it out” because they were working right along with me. It was such a relief! Although guided by systematic curriculum, I remember first hearing about Montessori and Magnet schools in California, so these teachers may have been influenced by existential/constructivist theory in their approach. Other great teachers have remained dear to my heart because of their unconditional faith in me, their genuine interest and investment in their students and the passion they brought to their work. Some kind of spark ignited inside me whenever a teacher took a personal interest in what I was doing. When I said I wanted to be a singer when I grew up, Mr. Taylor did not laugh. He said, “ I’ll be the first one in line to buy every one of your albums! ” Later on, my favorite high school teachers were the ones who strayed from the texts. Mrs. Beckman got our attention by jump-starting units with in depth class discussions about current events. Mrs. Thomas ditched outlined notes and drew pictograms all over the board to tell us the story of U. S. History. I did not know it at the time, but I was experiencing the benefits of engagement through differentiation, multiple intelligences and project-based inquiry firsthand. Paving the Road I am very proud to have attended good schools across the country as well as universities with rigorous academic programs. I often wonder how educators can take the easy way out, lining up in droves to earn ‘ degrees’ through online programs and private satellite campuses. Isn’t this a paradox: teachers saying that having a teacher is not necessary in education; educators supporting the idea that discourse and interaction in the classroom are auxiliary and dispensable extras? My undergraduate years followed a liberal arts program. We had cultural arts requirements as well as

critical thinking courses in addition to the traditional basic requirements in arts and sciences. During my sophomore year, I took a Career Development course. I was required to conduct personal interviews and participate in job shadowing and I remember asking a close friend, " I think I want to be a Guidance Counselor, is that weird? " Once the decision was made, I worked hard to complete the credits early and was able to graduate in December of 1993. Increasing my workload for early graduation allowed me time to pursue admission to a Masters program for Counseling, move off campus, and prepare for the next stage of my academic career. In June of 1994, I began an atypical Masters program at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. This program required 60 hours of work including a semester's worth of internship at 20-hours per week and one year at 40-hours per week in school settings. In the final semester students split off into courses emphasizing mental health or school counseling. I completed the sixty hours in two years while working full-time at Blockbuster Video. It was the only place (open until midnight) that allowed me to get everything done and still work enough hours to pay the bills. During my work at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, an emphasis was placed on challenging personal biases in order to be able to counsel others as a professional. Our multicultural counseling course was co-taught by two female professors, and some of their assignments changed my self-understanding profoundly. I now can see that they operated within the framework of radical curriculum (Null, 2011). We completed several unique exercises, such as going to a women's homeless shelter to prepare a meal with the residents and share dinner with them. Our thinking was pushed outside of the box, and I recognized the fact

that prejudice exists in all of us, in some way or another. Human nature is to ascertain self-worth by comparing ourselves to people around us- inherently placing a value judgment on daily choices and decisions to see whose are 'better'. In the final paper for the course, I remember admitting a prejudice against Mexicans because I held a stereotype of them in my mind-a dozen dirty men piled in overflowing vehicles on the way to do landscape work. This insight came in 1995 in the middle of the Blue Ridge Mountains! The surge of migrant workers and rapid increase of citizens of Latin decent had not really taken route yet. I'm glad I came to terms with the concept of white privilege and my own human tendencies before it did and before I entered employment with the public school system. My internships were completed at Quail Hollow Middle School and I jumped in to my assignments with enthusiasm. I had to provide individual, group and classroom guidance. I quickly became familiar with the entire staff. One practice that I developed right away was to annually sit in each classroom for an entire period. I assured faculty that I was not observing them but becoming familiar with their routines, practices and classroom climate so that I could back them up and speak from the same perspective when counseling students about grades, attendance or study habits. In February of 1996, one of the counselors resigned for maternity leave and I was offered the position. I was shocked, but very excited to have a permanent position in a school I loved. I stayed at Quail Hollow for four years. During this time I developed several work habits that made me stand out from the stereotypical image of a "coffee cup holding" Guidance Counselor. I became good at facilitating parent-teacher conferences, providing a neutral ear for both parties. My

ability to paraphrase and clarify points increased the productivity of conferences and team meetings. I attended every training that the teachers went to, simply because if someone was talking about it I wanted to know what they were talking about. How could I be a good educator if I did not understand the full gamut of the school's functions? After I moved to Florida in 2000, I continued as a Middle School Counselor for six more years. Harllee Middle School is situated in a part of town dubbed duplex city. When I attended new-hire orientation someone laughed at me and said, " I hope you brought your combat boots. " Harllee is in a low-income community. Children do participate in what they call " gangs", crime is high in the neighborhood, and many students have relatives who died young or are in jail. That didn't bother me a bit. I brought my Carolina repertoire with me and dove right in. The assistant principal who hired me would often brag to her peers that she, " had a real Guidance Counselor" and I took great pride each time I heard her say it. I was the counselor students actually made appointments with because they knew they could trust me with their innermost selves. These kids were already living life (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). They didn't come to school to prepare for life; they came to school to escape it. When I brought up long-term goals, I was told on more than one occasion, " Miss, I'm not gonna live ' til then. " My job was to convince pre-teens from the toughest part of town that they could be academically successful and have a future different from the life their parents were living. It was a hard battle, but one we faced together, year after year. I enjoy seeing some of these young people around town. They may be retail jobs or towing children along at a young age, but they are outside of duplex city, living life and smiling

when they see me. The Principal at the time was basically an " on-the-job retiree". He was known to say " Yes! " to everyone, even if it contradicted what he approved for someone else three minutes prior. The lack of leadership left a void to be filled. Staff began coming to me with their needs more and more. I was paired up with an adept and assertive assistant principal and we worked very closely together. Not only did I begin handling discipline referrals autonomously, but I also became the key programmer for the master schedule, continued as testing coordinator and chaired several committees. As I began to do the work of an assistant principal more and more, I realized that instructional leadership was in my future. Teachers couldn't wait until I was assigned to their grade level and I was told more than once that when I got up to talk at a faculty meeting teachers relaxed with a sigh of relief because, " it would make sense now". I have always made it a goal to tease out the most critical information necessary for teachers to function and leave the red tape hidden behind me as much as possible. I joined a cadre from Manatee County taking prerequisite Masters level courses at the University of South Florida-Sarasota in 2002, sat for the Florida Educational Leadership Exam and became certified in a short period of time. Meanwhile, I was accepted into the Educational Specialists program at the Tampa campus. From 2003 to 2005 I commuted several days a week, packing breakfast, lunch and dinner before heading out for fifteen-hour days at work and class. Course assignments took up the bulk of my time during those years, but I was not a stranger to the life of dedicated academic study. My professors noticed my potential and persuaded me to move into the Doctoral program sometime along the way. I completed candidacy

requirements at nearly the same time I was hired into my first administrative position in November of 2005. From Transactional to Transformative Leadership To sum up my administrative experiences, three have been quite stressful and four have been tremendously rewarding. Several character traits impacted my actions as a beginning administrator and distracted me from my university work. Needing to please people used to be a strong characteristic of mine. I wanted to do anything and everything that was asked of me and do it well but I was not ready, in hindsight, to complete a dissertation and learn a new job at the same time. I also know that my personal discomfort with confrontations made supervision challenging for me at times. Most importantly, I was lonely, and I wanted a place where I could belong, so I did everything I could to avoid rocking the boat (Killingsworth, Cabezas, & Kensler, 2010). To make matters more complicated, I got caught in a whirlwind of large-scale annual transfers for assistant principals. Manatee County has faced a surge of simultaneous retirements amongst administrative personnel since 2007. Twenty-one of our thirty-three elementary schools have Principals with four years or less experience and of the remaining twelve schools, at least three will have openings in the next two years. Senior management placed an emphasis on maximizing exposure of assistant principals (A. P. s) to a variety of school cultures and operational styles in preparation to fill the void. Among the schools I have worked at, the number of A. P. s teachers have worked with since 2002 goes as high as eight. I have worked with two principals best described as operating from a coercive framework and one that was authoritarian (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2011). Principals one and three can be described as narcissistic,

thriving on a large following of teacher "fans" procured by their charm and charisma and Principal two was mentally ill. She eventually resigned from the district. These Principals can be described as my non-examples, at best. I was entirely pragmatic and reactive while working in their schools. The first Principal, who lacked any interest in academic performance and treated the school day with a very laissez faire attitude, was eventually demoted back to an assistant principal. I often filled the void when her interest waned. Eager to prove myself, I responded to the teachers' need for leadership as best I could. I never said no to them, or to the Principal, and I worked by the moment and by the book- without any guidance, theoretically or in person. I treated teachers as laborers because I, myself, was a laborer. I would classify my work during this time frame as phase two in Hall's Phases of Consciousness (Ubben, et al., 2011) because of my overriding need for belonging and self-preservation and as transactional leadership in that I was searching for organizational affiliation as an elementary administrator. My next assignment was at a school whose principal suffered from bi-polar disorder. During the seven months that I worked with her I shifted down to phase one on Hall's continuum- pure survival. I was unable to comfort the staff members who experienced this person's wrath and could not forge a positive relationship with her myself. I felt disconnected and without purpose. The third Principal had personal relationships with both of my prior supervisors along with his own share of drama. He has had repeated arrests and investigations with our Office of Professional Standards. I probably shifted back to phase two in Hall's continuum (Ubben, et al., 2011) during my tenure there although experience was pushing me towards the third

phase marked by individuality. I had my own opinions, which the Principal valued, and had worked with enough elementary teachers to recognize good teaching and ways to help others develop their skills. The Principal considered me " the smartest A. P. " he'd ever had and let me participate in meetings, although he maintained center stage. I began to move towards a more transformational style of leadership and was ready to take a more deliberative approach to by this point. I knew the management side of schooling very well and the time had come to have more impact on teaching within individual classrooms. The experiences from 2005 to 2010 took a toll on me. I realized that I was no longer projecting the internal image I held of myself. I also noticed that I was being associated as a cohort to the three principals I had worked for in the minds of other principals and district leadership. Being a newbie, I had never questioned or challenged my assignments, taking them with a quick, " yes, sir" each time. I didn't have the courage or knowledge base to defend what I recognized as a form of entrapment, I was just grateful to have a job and believed everyone would see me for my own strengths. The tendency for women to self-censure as a survival tactic in administrative roles is not uncommon (Bourgeois, 2010; Killingsworth, et al., 2010). When I realized that the new director for Elementary Schools questioned my capacity I knew things had to change and I had to make them happen. I met with the Superintendent (also new to his position) in 2010 and outlined my course with as little blame as possible. Instead I emphasized the personal relationships I had been thrust in the middle of by being placed at each of the three schools, admitted my own personal and professional immaturity in my early thirties, and asked for

assignment with an experienced principal whom I could learn from without further drama. He heard me out and my wish was granted, but the mobility was not over yet. In the fall of 2010, I was the only A. P. assigned to two schools. The reasoning behind it was three-fold: both schools had enrollment too low to allocate an A. P., and one had a newly-appointed principal with a one-month old baby. The school was under still construction when it opened in August. The Director told me to " go in there and support your Principals' visions. " Not only did I do so, but I also rose to be seen as an intelligent, proactive and skilled assistant principal. My ratings on annual evaluations continued to rise and were now given merit because of the merit of the individuals completing them. I sensed a lightness of being, a freedom from weight I had not realized I had been carrying for the last few years. I began to see " myself" again and I knew that my contemporaries were seeing her, too, if only for the first time. Veteran principals who had never spoken to me began to seek me out for casual conversation at conferences and meetings. People greeted me with a smile instead of a turned shoulder. I had taken the stressors of my early years as " the way it is for everyone" because it was all I knew. Now I had arrived inside an invisible fence that no one had ever told me existed. The last transfer, to date, occurred in December of 2010. I got a call one morning telling me I was headed out west. The A. P. at my current school had been terminated and the Principal (my age and in his first year) needed me there. The construction taking place a few months earlier was completed and both schools were in capable hands. With shock and tearful eyes, I submitted another, " yes, sir". Even though I had been at my current locations only a few brief months, strong relationships had formed at each

school with my supervisors and my supervisees. One teacher refused to talk to me until my last day to keep from crying. Farewell parties, hugs and parting acts of kindness filled my heart with a mixture of gratitude and resentment. I did not know then that I was entering another wonderful school environment. In the last year and a half I have formed a strong connection with my principal, both personally and professionally. We support each other through family crises and have lost a combined total of over 90 pounds together. The Principal and I can finish each other's sentences and take heart to mutual discourse on how we communicate with staff, formally and informally. We operate primarily from a democratic framework (Ubben, et al., 2011) emphasizing collaboration, shared decision-making and team building. Community involvement is at a high. We are visionaries who see the big picture and have been successful mobilizing teacher leaders through committee work. I have now reached phase four according to Hall's continuum (Ubben, et al., 2011). Practical Wisdom When I first began working in school administration, I thought that my belief in differentiation, problem solving and the importance of personal meaning making indicated a constructivist philosophy. As I dove into the daily operations positivistic curriculum definitely took first place, that in which students progress from developmental stage to stage, in sequence by coming to understand the socially determined curriculum that is placed in front of them. I was a consumer of very linear curriculum in grade school and acted in tune with my background experiences. Now that I have compared curriculum frameworks that have evolved over the past several decades, I would have to say that I see myself as a critical pragmatist - one who " facilitates the

interplay of practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge" (Jenlink as cited in Bourgeois, 2010). I believe that curriculum should meet the needs of the local community and nation. I believe that there are basic tenets that all children should be exposed to and that lessons should be results-oriented but I'm not so convinced to align myself with the bureaucratic, policy-driven control of modernistic structuralism (Bourgeois, 2010). The results I am looking for include the ability to analyze, evaluate and justify responses to complex tasks. I think that project-based inquiry is important and that teachers need to learn to be coaches, allowing the course of the lesson to unfold as the children take hold of it. I also believe that true learning only happens when can apply knowledge to their personal lives. Items memorized for a test can just as soon be forgotten. When students use academic language to describe their thought processes and those of their peers, understanding is internalized and will be available for application in real world settings. I believe that children are a product of the culture in which they live (Janzen, 2008) but are not prisoners of it. As in my own experience, children can interpret and counter social norms, even contradict prescribed social behavior. Sometimes they have such keen awareness of the conditions around them that they can devise better solutions than the adults in their lives (Janzen, 2008). However, I am not at the extreme of existential thought that ignores the place of organized bodies of knowledge in our schools and leaves curriculum construction completely up to the " capricious inclinations" of very young children (Null, 2011, p. 85; Appignanisi & Garrett, 2004; Fay, 2012). While working on this projected, I related most to the question presented by Grundy when he asked, " how can I engage in forms of critical,

self-reflective and collaborative work that will create conditions so that the people with whom I work can come to control their knowledge and practice?" (Jenlink, 2010, p. 203). Prudence, being sensible in action and in thought, is a trait I aim toward daily. Null (2011) referred to Aristotle's advice, "arguing that the best place to begin when seeking to cultivate this virtue is by looking at the people who possess it. Those who have a reputation for making wise judgments should serve as role models" (p. 268). What I've learned from my role models is more than I can ever put into words, but I've listed what I think of when I think of each of them below: Mary Wolf: Know what is going on everywhere, at all times. Keep confidants near without becoming a peer or "buddy". Listen to what people are sharing with each other. Linda Fouse: Have fun with the staff. Team builders and appreciation events can take place that aren't overly thematic or centered around happy hour. It's ok to let the parents have a voice. They are the students' biggest advocates, and you want it that way. Hayley Rio: Spend time (at night, weekends, holidays) to determine a clear vision and annual goal. Make that the center of every conversation. Post it, talk about it, live it. Then let teachers have a say in all the negotiables (picture schedules, assemblies, etc.). Myra Russell: Take time to hire the best. Don't turn your cheek if performance is less than expected. Address it with tact and clear expectations in private conference. Build a strong, flexible office team to support you and keep things running when you are away. Dress professionally, arrive early and get involved at the district level. Barry Dunn: Build relationships. Get out of the office. Talk to everyone about personal lives, not just school. If you put people first and are supportive, work

performance rises. Use informal, voluntary gatherings for discussion and shared-decision making. You can often get your ideas rolling this way and the group thinks they came up with it! Put money into time for planning, professional learning and collaboration. Celebrate the little things.

Curriculum Delivery and School Improvement From 2005 to 2011, our district valued systematic curriculum implementation (Null, 2011). In an effort to boost achievement on standardized tests, the district told schools what textbook they would use and a curriculum was developed that detailed page numbers and even quoted statements for direct instruction. Teachers were required to post a common board configuration so that any visitor (i. e., district executives) could verify compliance if they (seldom) entered a classroom. The terms rigor and fidelity became vogue but teacher morale went down, and fast. Classroom walkthroughs were required- at least twenty per week- for electronic submission to the district. We were using curriculum standards and rapid series of professional learning, such as the work of Robert Marzano, Max Thompson, and the Pearson Push to control teachers rather than guide them (Appignanisi & Garrett, 2004; Null, 2011). I thought, at least for the first four years, that it was a good thing. I had been in too many classrooms where “ cause and effect” was being described completely backwards or “ the history of reindeer” was the primary subject for the month of December. Teachers had too much room for interpretation, or were just stuck on lessons they had written twenty years ago. We (I) needed clear standards for each grade level so that students would be prepared to take part in society. If we deposited the right information each child had a chance, or so I thought. With the influx of the Common Core Standards (required in

Kindergarten and First Grade in 2012-2013) and the impending Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test, I think we've taken a turn towards Deliberative Curriculum at the district level as a means to an ends although the standards, themselves are probably based in pragmatic theory (Null, 2011). The standards form the skeleton, and a Road Map exists district-wide detailing the bottom-line, what must be taught at each grade each quarter. The standards are certainly controlled by national interest groups and the determination of what is included, excluded and/or deemed worthy of attention is done so with the promise of increased capacity to compete in a global society. However, this time around, the resources and contexts of exploration are being developed in the district by stakeholders (voluntary committees of teacher representative) and will be presented to teachers as "possibilities" (Fradley, 2012). This approach is deliberative in nature because the emphasis is on making interdisciplinary connections rather than learning fragmented pieces of information and collaborative self-reflection is critical as a means of deliberate practice (McWilliam, 1992). Our newly installed district leadership recognized the "frustration, dissension, apathy and failure" teachers have been subjected to (Fradley, 2012) at the district Leadership Academy in July and promise to place a value on innovation, reflective practice, professional learning and formative assessment for the upcoming year. The requirement for walkthroughs has been reduced to four per year. An emphasis has been placed on reflective goal-setting and the term "Fierce Conversations" was plugged as a necessary element in progress monitoring and the evaluation of staff (Gates, 2012). I am happy with the changes coming. I now know that

many of the curricular weaknesses witnessed early on can be- must be- attended to by school administrators. It is our job to know what is going on in each classroom and address inconsistencies in teacher performance directly. Doing so promotes self-worth, purpose and passion for everyone in the organization. Teachers who receive feedback on areas needing improvement usually thrust all their energy into making such improvements. When individuals are ill equipped to perform their job administrators have the power and the duty to remove them from the classroom or school setting. Therefore, achievement and performance can be obtained, to the state's, the teacher's, and the parents' satisfaction if we look at supervision as a moral responsibility and adopt critical approaches to curriculum delivery (Palestini, 2003) through shared leadership and collaboration- moving the whole institution forward, rather than focusing on one classroom at a time. With the promised increased of autonomy at the school level, we hope to do a better job identifying and challenging underlying assumptions that impact the school's culture and individual students' educational experience. Response to Intervention (RtI) has helped us shift the way we work in the last two years. After working out the kinks and finding a definition that made sense to us, we now treat RtI as an opportunity to monitor individual students' progress, problem-solve as a group, and identify areas of weakness in all aspects of instruction- from whole group core curriculum to intensive, individualized interventions. No longer can teachers stand at the board and talk over six year old heads. By studying individual students' progress in comparison to peer groups, we are actually making a significant impact on Tier 1, or core curriculum, delivery to the whole class. Teachers who were

quick to assign students to special education programs, removing the opportunity for a standard diploma and limiting their options as adults (Palestini, 2003), are having to change their practices so that each child is fully exposed to the mainstream curriculum in regular education settings. "Working with human beings is not the same as working with Ford trucks, therefore, curriculum cannot be created without regard to the teachers who will teach it and the learners who will learn it" (Null, 2011, p. 64). Race, Gender and Class Issues Manatee County has a high migrant population and the dependency on low-wage workers has a major impact on our schools. Individuals, even within the commissioner's office, are known to own dozens of units in duplex city and migrant camps across town. The profit they make as "slumlords", along with the cheap labor migrants provide to local farmers, make the likelihood of a population shift unlikely in the near future. As a result, more and more schools are qualifying as Title 1 in our county each year. The constant flux of both teachers and students at Title 1 schools makes it challenging for administrators to ensure that qualified instructors are in each classroom (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004) and to accurately set and monitor student achievement goals. The money spent on training initiatives goes down the drain each spring when skilled teachers transfer out and unskilled teachers take their place through the voluntary transfer process- a process that occurs centrally without any input from the site-based principals involved on either end. The individuals who chose to enter Title 1 are usually jumping from school to school. They move each time an administrator is concerned about their performance. In one case a person joined my staff whose only experience was small group math remediation in

an alternative school. Her primary tool in the former position was a series of worksheets. She took a high-stakes fifth grade teaching position because it was close to her part-time job in the afternoons. To take it a step further, each time a principal retires, Title 1 principals are allowed to take lateral transfers to higher income schools, leaving the Title 1 positions open for inexperienced A. P. s to interview and move into. These policies reinforce a social system that perpetuates inadequate and inequitable schooling for the families who need the most support. All the while, schools are being charged to correct common urban issues such as crime (bullying), gang activity, and high school dropout. During the mid-2000s, our former Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum responded to this call to action. As a black woman, herself, she bemoaned the social injustices she was witnessing. She instituted a social promotion policy in response to the surplus of overage high school students. This policy has backfired. Students who were lacking skills in reading in third grade seven years ago are still unable to pass the state exam required in tenth grade for graduation (Fradley, 2012). McWilliam (1992) describes this handicapping scenario: " In focusing on ' education and social disadvantage' without moving to ' teaching for equity access' we often pull up short of the very knowledge that student teachers rightly crave-the skills of teaching to overcome disadvantage" (p. 15). As revealed earlier, I have a keen eye and ear for prejudiced behaviors amongst my peers. I cannot help but notice the undercurrent of prejudice and disempowerment that is rampant in this community. Those who preface comments with, " I'm not prejudiced but.... " or who whisper, "...He's Black..." in the middle of a conversation are usually the guiltiest ones. They unknowingly change their

tone of voice when disciplining a black child, refuse to make eye contact with the non-English speaking parent (focusing only on the translator), or seem to forget their work ethic when no one is looking. Bradenton could well be declared “ Home of the Good ‘ Ole Boy System” in light of the unequal distribution of labor (men often go to the barber or the golf course during the workday) and the disempowerment of the migrant class (Killingsworth, et al., 2010)! On a similar note, I have grimaced watching textbook companies add faces of color to their illustrations and give names such as “ Laquisha” and “ Juan” to their characters. These superficial efforts do little to bring cultural relevance to the tale that can help students see both their current self and potential future self within their studies. I have noticed the bias built into tests that contain unusual vocabulary (barrette/fawn) or storylines so complex that the items end up testing reading comprehension rather than math or science. Still, I have not seen an opportunity for elementary curriculum to “ dismantle dominant social structures” as postmodernists would like to do (Bonifazio, 2007). We are subjects of a deeply indoctrinated national movement that serves the interests of the elite, and at the school level have little say in what knowledge is worthy of students’ time. Just knowing that my teachers are aware of these biases when they bring these concerns to the table for discussion during lesson planning is satisfying to some degree. We do what we can within our own walls. To my surprise, conducting this reflection piece has made me more aware of the challenges I’ve faced as a woman in administration. When applying for A. P. positions, four of the five jobs I interviewed for were filled by males. The Director of Elementary Schools helps perpetuate male dominance. He is a family man,

his wife is a teacher and he loves talking about his grandkids, but try to talk about something school related and his attention drops as he turns his head to talk to another man about the latest sports statistic. He has gone so far as to joke about a female principal's breast pumping routine at administrative meetings and once displayed a provocative image of a busty lady before a meeting as part of an inside joke with some of the other men. He has told repeated stories of his alcoholic mom in public group settings. I think that, like many other male administrators, he is influenced to see women as being incapable of balancing power and intelligence, or as described by Killingsworth, et al., (2010), holds a " deep-seeded masculine conception of leadership" (p. 531) of which women are naturally incapable of participating in. If women are seen only maternal, sexual, or faulty/weak beings (Appignanisi & Garrett, 2004; Bonifazio, 2007), how can I posture myself best working in a professional man's world (Brady & Hammett, 1999; Killingsworth, et al., 2010)? Now that I consider gender issues, I realize that the undercurrent of gender identity affects relationships with female peers as well as males. Interactions are somewhat distant unless they are mother-like in nature. In Italian, *affidamento* (meaning trust or custody) describes " a form of relationship that is based on the authority one woman bestows upon another through the sharing of expertise or guidance" (Bonifazio, 2007). While such guidance and mentoring is critically important as a mutual support system, we women administrators cannot reserve the sharing of ideas and experiences for selected professional posterity if we are to secure our position amongst the school administration and stay there in equal proportion to gender demographics in other educational roles (teachers,

counselors, special education, media specialists, cafeteria workers, bus drivers and custodial staff) (Brady & Hammett, 1999; Killingsworth, et al., 2010). Three weeks ago, I would have cringed at the topic of feminism, considering it a crutch for the incapable or a over-sung lyric for the bleeding-heart liberal. Now, I can actually relate to the notion of a critical feminist postmodern perspective because it seeks to identify solutions to the fact that subgroups have different experiences within educational leadership (Brady & Hammett, 1999) rather than dwell on the subliminal influences, the why, focused on by postmodernists (Fay, 2012). Instead of trying to delineate the differences in male and female leadership behaviors, critical feminist postmodernists work to figure out how we can increase acceptance, empowerment, and personal agency for various subgroups rather than forcing any group to conformity or outright dismissal (Appignanisi & Garrett, 2004; Brady & Hammett, 1999). As a woman, I agree with Brady & Hammett's (1999) advice that " women should organize with others around their common struggles for self-determination and communal agency" (p. 55). Critical feminist postmodern theory has caught my attention and will inspire future research on my part. What Now? Coming back into the program with work experience is proving to be exciting because I can relate theories and models to practice. I find the depths of curriculum analysis to be complex and personally challenging, although an appreciation for the unspoken and unpublicized influences on what constitutes knowledge and how it is obtained is as critical for educators as is an awareness of persuasion tactics used by mass media for young adults. By undergoing a " critical examination of our own lives and our understanding of the complex

practices that influence and control our everyday experiences...we can work to help others create structure and practices that are yet unimagined (Brady, 2006). I am only just now reaching a new point of self-actualization. The conditions of safety, security, and affiliation that have entered my life in the last few years are allowing me to reach further within to improve my outward practice. In order to become a more worthy candidate for principalship, I am interested in studying the unique characteristics of female administration, particularly in relation to the types of feedback we give to teachers, how the feedback is received in comparison to feedback from male administrators, and the impact of both on school performance. I know that I will pay more keen attention to masculine traits in the workplace, such as analysis, rationality, and competition as opposed to feminine traits such as intuition, collaboration, and approachability (Brady & Hammett, 1999) as they play out around me. I am challenged to "refuse simplistic and derogatory images.... as well as uncover unexamined assumptions through critical self-examination..." (Brady, 2006, p. 59; Fay, 2012). As Riger describes it, "much of what we know about educational leadership may be entirely wrong for its marginalization of women's experiences and perspective" (as cited in Killingsworth, et al., 2010, p. 536). "La pratica del partire da sé"- taking oneself as a starting point. Beginning with oneself means that the free understanding of oneself and the world around oneself must necessarily be reconfigured and rethought beginning from one's own gendered experience" —Alina Marazzi References Appignanisi, R., and Garratt, C. (2004).

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